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ABSTRACT

For the past 2 years, a pilot program to reduce student absenteeism has been implemented in a medium-sized city participating in the New Futures Initiative. This paper presents findings of a study that examined the outcomes of the Chronic Absenteeism Pilot (CAP) project. The New Futures Initiative engaged in interagency efforts to provide coordinated, integrated, and student-centered services to chronically absent youth and their families. Data for part 1 of the study were obtained from interviews with 63 key resource persons. Part 2 collected data from interviews with community associates assigned to CAP, the CAP supervisor, a representative sample of CAP students, a matched sample of school attendees, and teachers. Findings showed that despite elaborate interagency agreements, very little was known about potentially collaborative efforts on behalf of chronically absent youth in the city; what was known was seen as controversial and doomed to failure. The program was hampered by basic ideological differences and agendas held by the social service agencies and public schools, substantial power differences among the agencies, and the lack of a legitimate convener to represent stakeholders. In addition, the problem of chronic absenteeism was greater than previously reported. Teachers tended to view CAP students in negative terms. "Attenders" expressed positive attitudes about themselves and their schools; CAP students did not. However, CAP students expressed indifference, rather than hostility, toward their schools. (LMI)

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Chronic Absenteeism: A Community Issue

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CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM: A COMMUNITY ISSUE

Perspective on Absenteeism

School enrollment has increased throughout this century. During the past two decades, however, a parallel phenomenon has deprived a substantial number of children of the fundamental education they need. Increasing rates of school absenteeism/truancy have become widespread, particularly at the middle and high school levels. Research into truancy has become a growth industry in the social sciences. Public interest, media attention, and political controversy have provoked an increase in the intensity of societal demand for "something to be done" (ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management, 1992).

Student absenteeism has been, and continues to be, one of the most seriously intractable problems for secondary school administrators. Nationwide, high school students miss about ten percent of their school days every year (U.S. Department of Education, 1992). In larger metropolitan areas, this rate may be at least twice as high. If dropouts (annually about ten percent of the total high school population) are added, the overall daily absence rate would exceed 20 percent. Worse, absences are probably "under-reported" because of student deviousness, careless reporting practices, varying definitions of absence, and administrative concern for "appearances" and school reimbursements; thus, the real percentage of daily absences actually may be higher still (de Jung and Duckworth, 1985).

Not only are absence rates disturbingly high, but the causes of absenteeism are also complex. Inadequate or inappropriate school curricula may lead to high absentee rates (Betancourt, 1990). Personal and social factors (like student relationships with particular school administrators and teachers, family attitudes, peer pressures, social values, economic circumstances, age, and health) may also cause high rates.

For the past two years, a pilot program attempting to reduce school absenteeism has been implemented in a middle-sized city participating in the New Futures Initiative.[1] This present study investigated efforts made by this Chronic Absenteeism Pilot (CAP). Additionally, the present study assessed chronically absent adolescents regarding their attitudes about teachers together with their perceptions of parents, Community Associates (representatives from community agencies assigned to the pilot), and themselves.

Correlates of Truancy

Prior studies of the correlates of truancy have focused primarily on relationships between home background and truancy levels (Berg, 1980). Early work in truancy demonstrated a higher incidence of parental neglect, dirtiness, and defective home discipline amongst truants (Sommer, 1975). Other research suggested that children who are insecure at home were not equipped to meet the demands of school discipline (e.g., Reynolds et al., 1980). In many cases of truancy, the parents showed little interest in the child's education. Home background factors, thus, appear to be important in determining whether or not a child will acquire the socially desirable habit of regular school attendance.

Socioeconomic status and truancy may be related. Several studies have confirmed an inverse relationship between social class and truancy (e.g., Ruther et al., 1970); other studies have found an association between large family size and truancy (e.g., Farrington, 1980). At least one study

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[1] The New Futures Initiative, sponsored by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, is a four-city, five-year project designed to respond to disadvantaged populations through comprehensive community partnerships aimed at increasing academic achievement, reducing dropout and teen pregnancy rates, and increasing the employability of at-risk middle and high school students.

reports a relationship between the socioeconomic status of the school's catchment area and truancy (Reynolds et al., 1980). Some researchers report that families of truants tended to be of below-average income and, in many cases, without a father. While most studies show a relationship between truancy and lower socioeconomic status, others do not.

Several studies have found a substantial increase in truancy rate as age increases (e.g., Cooper, 1984). This could suggest that parental pressures on the child to encourage school attendance tend to decrease as the child grows older and/or the child's susceptibility and responsiveness to such parental pressures also decreases.

In general, studies have found the following factors associated with truancy: poor parenting practices, marital discord, crowding in the home, substandard housing, many children in the family, little interest in education, and age of the child.

Behavioral and Personality Characteristics of Truant Youths

Scant attention has been given to the investigation of personality and behavioral characteristics as they relate to youngsters who are truant (Cooper, 1984). The stereotype of truant youngsters suggests that they are rebellious, angry, headstrong, impulsive, and anti-authoritarian. However, as noted previously, other personality types - such as a school phobic child - might also be chronically absent. School phobic children, though often unusually willful and stubborn especially within the home, also tend to be fearful, overprotected by their mothers, and to be younger members of the family.

Prior studies (e.g., Billington, 1979) suggested that the typical truant was a lonely, insecure, and unhappy child. Such studies showed truants to be generally more anxious, to have lower self-concepts, and to have difficulty in forming relationships with others. These characteristics may also relate to the findings that truants were more introverted and significantly less popular.

Other characteristics, though less often associated with the stereotypic truant youngsters, also are reported in the literature. For example, secondary school truants frequently are aggressive, show off, and seek attention (Cooper and Mellors, 1985). Obviously, then, various personality variables must be included in any study of truant youngsters. Not only must self-concept be measured, but also interpersonal relationships and attitudes toward parents, school and others in authority, as well as broadly sampling other personality dimensions.

Further, standard personality inventories may not be sufficiently sensitive to detect personality differences which exist between truants and non-truants. Most personality inventories are oriented toward gross emotional pathology, and not toward more common dimensions of personality. Thus, in the present study, it was necessary to develop a new inventory.

In considering personality characteristics of the truants, one must also consider the personality characteristics of adolescents in general. Adolescents frequently are preoccupied with themselves and with how they appear to others. Their own feelings and perceptions constitute reality for them, and they seldom realize that others may not be so admiring or critical as themselves. An "imaginary audience" is formed; the reaction to this audience explains much adolescent behavior such as self-consciousness and the wish for privacy.

Thus, a youngster may perceive him/herself as being accepted or rejected regardless of what his/her parents' or teachers' actions or intentions are. Nonetheless, those perceptions are realities for that youngster. When a youngster perceives his/her parents or teachers as loving or unloving, they actually are so from his/her viewpoint, even if no one else agrees.

Because the perceived world is so important, several approaches were undertaken to gain an understanding of that world, according to the chronically absent youth. In particular, information

was sought concerning how the youth saw his/her personality and the personality and behaviors of others.

Focus of Study

The New Futures Initiative engaged in interagency efforts to provide integrated, coordinated, student-centered case management and services to chronically absent youth and their families. This collaborative effort was to focus on resolving service access barriers and filling resource gaps which affect all youth and families with similar needs. The service focus, then, was on systems, not just on getting 210 (the number of chronically absent youth in the city school system identified for CAP) youth back in school.

The present study assisted the New Futures Initiative in assessing the effectiveness of operations by assessing four principal areas. These were:

1. Community Associates staff efforts to identify, engage, and "impact" identified CAP students.

2. Community Associates staff efforts in intensive case management to work closely with the youth, his/her family, community agencies, and the city school system to develop success plans for each youth.

3. Community agencies (i.e., those pledged to CAP) efforts to change policy and/or practices for those youth identified as chronically absent.

4. Recommendations for change and/or reflection based on a review of efforts listed above.

In addition to these four areas, a sample of the chronically absent youth was studied in more detail. This additional focus emphasized demographic, family, and personality dimensions.

Data Source

This study consisted of data sources from two parts:

Part I: Mutual knowledge of agencies and programs which focus on chronically absent youth was thought to be an essential element for collaboration. It was also important to know about agencies' specific collaborative efforts. The primary method used for this portion of the assessment consisted of structured interviews with key resource persons who were selected because they were likely to be knowledgeable about CAP. Using a standardized interview protocol, 63 individuals were interviewed. This sample represented a cross section of roles, perspectives, and opinions regarding chronically absent youth in the community.

Part II: The primary method for this portion of the assessment consisted of structured interviews with: Community Associates assigned to CAP, the CAP supervisor, a representative sample of CAP students, a matched sample of school attendees, and the teachers of identified chronically absent students. The structured interviews used a multi-faceted approach: an attendance records review, an archival method, an adjective checklist (adapted from Leary's *Interpersonal Checklist* and Gough's *Adjective Checklist*), an interview protocol, a card-sort activity (i.e., 108 cards, each containing a statement about the "world" of an adolescent), and an attitude/behavior scale.

Results of this Study

Part I Results

Findings Related to Collaboration

Despite their initial selection as being knowledgeable about CAP, the respondents' answers to these questions varied greatly from basically no knowledge of any specific program or effort on behalf of chronically absent youth to a detailed description of the wording on the Interagency Agreements. However, very few respondents could describe specific agency commitments (even those of their own agencies) in terms of this chronic absenteeism pilot. With the exception of the New Futures and Community Connections staff, individuals spoke in generalities when asked about case management and/or changes in agencies' policies or practices on behalf of chronically absent youth. These generalities ranged from "they are trying to reform the schools" to "the CAs work as a kind of social worker for the kids."

Service brokers spoke frequently about the presumptions of the Interagency Agreements; the school service broker spoke of difficulties in identification/definition of chronically absent youth, disagreement with how money was being spent on this project, and general dissension about the merit of the current approach. Agency heads spoke of the problems with "non-categorical case management."

No respondent spoke of a workable strategic plan for CAP. The Pilot component seemingly was to evolve through concepts rather than specifics.

The communication, commitment, and overall level of involvement likewise varied highly. None of the individuals interviewed could describe the Interagency Task Force on Chronic Absenteeism as was initially conceived in New Futures documentation. Although several service brokers and agency heads discussed the original signing of the Interagency Agreements, only a few had attended at least one meeting of the Task Force.

New Futures and Community Connections staff were the most knowledgeable about the Case Management Team for Chronically Absent Youth. All could name CAs involved, recount the process through which the students had been selected for this pilot, and delineate problems encountered with the city school system (CSS) and the CAP Pilot. Even so, New Futures and Community Connections staff often outlined the different goals and objectives for the Pilot. Most goals and objectives mentioned centered around four themes: (1) "To get the kids back in school," (2) "To get the CSS to be more responsive to the needs of these kids," (3) "To identify barriers to service delivery for CAP students," and (4) "To coordinate the efforts of service agencies to better deliver services to these youth and their families."

Even though truancy always involves schools, many individuals - both inside and outside of the New Futures and Community Connections staff - were also critical of the city school system and the lack of leadership on the part of the schools. Many felt the schools were not invested in New Futures. Consensus and shared involvement by those involved seemed lacking.

In a short time, it became clear the key players knew little about potential collaborative efforts (i.e., case management and/or changes in agencies' policies or practices) on behalf of chronically absent youth in the city despite the Interagency Agreements. Further, what was known was seen as controversial and doomed to failure. Over half of the individuals involved did not envision the CAP Pilot in its current design lasting the year. Surprisingly, only the New Futures and Community Connections staff thoroughly understood the nature of a "pilot program" - although several were quick to add that some changes in the original design of the project (e.g., identifying other students with whom to work) probably would be necessary.

In summary, the comments and resulting conclusions regarding efforts on behalf of the Chronic Absenteeism Pilot were: (1) Necessary key participants were not vested in this project; (2) The school system had critical issues with this project beyond which it could not move forward; (3) The CAs in this project lacked clear and consistent direction; and (4) Social service agency heads lacked commitment and investment in this effort.

Factors Identified

Certainly, the obstacles discussed above are not insurmountable in every situation. However, collectively, they are clearly potent ones and strongly suggest the "climate" for collaboration around the issue of chronically absent youth in the city was not conducive to joint efforts. The following factors were identified.

The conflict surrounding chronically absent youth often was rooted in basic ideological differences and agendas. For example, the educators questioned the school's role in dealing with family and other social issues of its students; New Futures/Community Connections staff looked to family and social impediments as issues to manage to increase the likelihood of student attendance in school. Downtown business leaders pressured the police and the courts to remove chronically truant students from the streets; they feared a decrease in "downtown business" (their primary "ideology") due to the presence of "large groups of kids hanging around potentially threatening shoppers." The schools, on the other hand, demanded disruptive students (many times the chronically truant students) be removed from their classrooms; they feared these students would interfere with the education (their primary "ideology") of other students.

One stakeholder having the power to take unilateral action limited collaboration. Evidence (e.g., past New Futures evaluations) suggested the city school system frequently had acted unilaterally during the five-year course of the Casey Foundation/New Futures Initiative. Minutes of New Futures Collaborative meetings reflecting concerns of "the schools see this differently and how can we address these concerns" and the organization of the Integrated Services Task Force (only four months into the Pilot) at the insistence of "Collaborative" members who were getting feedback that the schools had some "serious concerns re: Chronic Absenteeism Pilot" were just two examples of the ability of one stakeholder to "dictate" the agenda.

A legitimate convener was necessary. Originally, New Futures and Community Connections were envisioned as the "convener"/"conduit" for collaborative efforts of social and educational change in the city school system, social service agencies, juvenile court system, and the community. New Futures spearheaded and championed efforts to get the Interagency Agreements signed and committed resources to the Chronic Absenteeism Pilot. The results of the interviews for this study suggested, in many respects, Community Associates were "acting in a vacuum" in terms of chronically absent youth.

When substantial power differentials existed, one or more relevant groups of stakeholders could not establish representation. This issue is similar to the issue discussed concerning the apparent ability of individual stakeholders to act unilaterally. The city school system, understandably, exerted substantial control over what happened in their classrooms; similarly, Juvenile Court exercised control over what happened in the programs it controlled. New Futures/Community Connections had difficulty establishing legitimacy and overcoming the tendency of others to label it as "just another social service agency." In terms of the CAP, the efforts of the Community Associates to interface with the schools were modestly successful; the city school system did not implement its aspects of the Interagency Agreement proposal.

Past interventions repeatedly had been ineffective. In the city, public/popular opinion held that New Futures/Community Connections largely had been ineffective in bringing about necessary change in the community's response to the needs of at-risk youth. (The major newspaper in the city printed several articles and editorials critical of and/or questioning the "success" of the New Futures Initiative.) While the facts may, or may not, have reflected the accuracy of that opinion,

nonetheless what was important was the public perception of what was "accurate." CAP had disappeared (or never appeared) in the eyes of those interviewed for this study; the public perception was that CAP efforts did not work or were not working.

Part II Results

Findings Related to Chronic Absentees

Demographic and Academic Information

Despite popular notions that it is generally males who are truant, females constituted a significant portion of the chronically absent students (42%) in this study. Eighty-two percent of the sample were 15 years old or younger. Despite their absenteeism, relatively few (22%) apparently were involved with the criminal justice system. This finding was surprising since truancy is technically a status offense and juvenile court has substantial potential influence. Truancy did not appear to be related to ethnicity. The proportion of African-American and Caucasian students approximately reflected the current ethnic composition in the city school system. Work study programs, for whatever reasons, appeared to be substantially associated with chronic absenteeism (48% OWA/OWE students).

The sample of 38 CAP students had an overall grade point average (GPA) of 1.5 (on a 4.0 scale) for the 1990-91 school year. The grade point average for the sample remained the same for the 1991-92 academic year. Such educational performance typically should have prompted some educational needs assessments. For the 38 CAP students, however, some educational needs assessment had been completed on only 18 of the subjects. For another two subjects, the CA had recorded that "no documentation" of an educational assessment could be found in the students' records; for the remaining 18 students, the CA had not recorded any information concerning educational needs assessments.

Home and Family Information

Most families' (46%) incomes came from wages or salaries; one-fourth of the families received income from AFDC. Despite previously stated notions, only 16 percent of the students came from families which have six or more members. Fully half of the chronically absent students were from families with four or fewer members.

Surprisingly, two-thirds of the families were described as close knit by the CAs, the youths, and the families themselves. Parents had higher expectations (67%) that their son or daughter would graduate from high school than did the CAs (57%) or the students themselves (55%). However, the parents had significantly less expectation (21%) that their children would go to college than either the CAs (35%) or the students themselves (32%). Ninety-seven percent of the parents, CAs, and the students expected the students to be employed upon completing their education.

Families which are disadvantaged, under stress, or encountering impediments undoubtedly would have difficulties in helping to overcome truancy problems. Lack of finances (24%) and overburdened parent(s) (23%) were the two most often cited family impediments to school attendance. This lack of finances could require youth to work or help out with caring for family members while parent(s) work, sometimes during school hours. Many youth grow up in single-parent families; thus, there are many responsibilities and stresses for one person to bear. In many instances, this strain leaves parents with little time or energy for their children's needs.

Another family impediment to school attendance would be the extent to which family goals conflict in terms of education for the children. The goals youths set for themselves may be unacceptable to other family members for a variety of reasons. The present data confirmed that such conflicts were clearly a factor. Conflicting family goals were identified as an impediment for 16 percent of the chronically absent students. By contrast, other impediments (such as illegal substance abuse,

lack of transportation, and loss of family member) were identified by less than six percent of the sample population.

Strengths of Truant Youths

Strengths of the chronically absent adolescents potentially could be important entry points into helping them develop their potentials and to engage them more consistently in school. Based on the information they gathered, the CAs could code up to five strengths for each CAP student. The results were surprising. Few adolescents received as many as three strengths with virtually none receiving all five. Only two strengths consistently emerged - communication skills and school attendance.

School attendance (15%) seems particularly paradoxical since these students are chronically truant. Nonetheless, apparently even the relatively small time they spent in school was viewed as a strength at least as much as communication skills (16%), and far more than other possible strengths, such as coping skills (5%), self-awareness (5%), leadership (4%), etc. It appeared the perceived strengths of these youths were limited.

Needs of Truant Youths

In sharp contrast to the perceived strengths, the CAs noted numerous apparent needs among the chronically absent youths. Three areas consistently were identified as needs by CAs, teachers, parents, and the youths as well. These were knowledge/education, self-control, and competency. However, although knowledge/education was identified by the youths as a need, it was considered as a need only by a small number (approximately one-fourth) of the CAP students. Apparently, school-type information is relatively unimportant in their eyes, but yet retains moderate importance for a few of the truant youths.

Demands on Truant Youths

Environments are not static; in any environment demands are placed on youth. The perceptions of these demands varied, however, depending on from whose viewpoint the situation was being considered.

Teachers, not surprisingly, sought academic achievement, behavioral changes, attendance, punctuality, and on-task, class behaviors. Parents sought academic achievement, behavioral changes, and attendance; however, parents also expected household responsibilities to be fulfilled. Interestingly, despite the financial difficulties of many of these families, few parents placed demands on their children for child care responsibilities (4%) or employment (1%).

For the youths, themselves, the primary and overwhelming demand was from peer pressure (54%), with behavioral change (19%) being the only other notable demand recognized by the youths. Academic achievement (4%) received little focus as did attendance (8%) or on-task, class behaviors (8%). Clearly the relative importance of environmental demand was different for the chronically absent youths than for the adults who dealt with these youths.

Particularly with such demographic data, it should be remembered that these findings between home and family variables are simply correlations. Although there might be intuitive appeal, proof of causality is not yet established. In other words, students from single-parent, lower socio-economic status, conflicting families will not necessarily become truants. Similarly, students from two-parent, higher socio-economic status, close-knit families will not necessarily have "no attendance problems."

Adjective Checklist and Card-Sort Activity

Truants' Personality Descriptions by Self and by Others

The initial, and very striking, finding was that the truant students overwhelmingly tended to indicate adjectives on the adjective checklist that were not characteristic of themselves, their teachers, their parents or their CAs. It was as though they could easily say what they were not (e.g., not afraid, not weak, not unfriendly), but had great difficulty saying what they were. Similarly, the truant students would say what their teachers were not (e.g., not conceited, not passive) or what their parents were not (e.g., not quitting, not rude), but very rarely could say what they were.

These findings were quite different from the responses of a comparison group of similar, but non-truant youths (described more fully later). Those comparison group students indicated about evenly what they were and what they were not (i.e., adjectives that described them and those that did not). It would appear, then, truants largely define themselves and others by default. That is, they have strong feelings as to what is not the case, but have notable difficulties defining what is true about themselves or others. These findings were consistent regardless of whether the descriptors were positive ones (e.g., friendly) or negative (e.g., weak).

Of further interest, it appeared the teachers and the CAs had a similar frame of reference. That is, when teachers or CAs used the same adjective checklist, they also consistently indicated by their responses what the truant student was not, but had difficulty in consistently indicating attributes which characterized the student.

Despite this unusual way of responding, the adjective checklist data revealed interesting information. Perhaps most striking was the lack of consistency between how the truant students saw themselves and how the teachers saw the truant students. Not surprisingly, the teachers saw a much larger number of negative personality attributes in the truant students than the students saw in themselves. In fact, the students' evaluations of themselves suggested a lack of insight. Teachers saw these students as afraid, sad, not cooperative, not helpful and not honest; the youths did not see themselves in those terms. Differences in perception by parents and by CAs were also apparent.

When the chronically absent youth sorted self-descriptive statements, it became apparent their self-views did not fit with the views others had of them and did not even fit with their overt behaviors of being absent from school. For example, over 80 percent endorsed the following statements:

"The grades I get depend on how hard I study."
"I think I am popular at school."
"Some teachers really care about me."
"There are a few teachers who are really important."
"My CA really cares about me."
"My CA always listens to me."
"My CA really helps me with my problems."
"My CA helps me with problems with my teachers."
"Becoming a success is a matter of hard work."
"People usually get the respect they deserve because they earn it."

However, they equally frequently endorsed the following statements which suggested a different self-view:

"Getting a good job depends mainly on luck."
"Some people are successful because they are lucky."
"Kids at my school have an attitude."
"Teachers try to mess with my business."

"My school has too many rules."
"Teachers at my school are too strict."

Despite their apparently contradictory and conflicting statements, it is interesting to note that the chronically absent youth did not have a pervasively hostile or rejecting attitude toward school attendance and participation. These results are somewhat surprising given the data reported earlier indicating these youths saw relatively little value in obtaining knowledge/education. It is as though their primary attitude was one of indifference to education rather than of hostility.

Two other alternative explanations exist. One is the truants attempted to give socially desirable answers simply to please the researchers; another is they had "pseudo-insight" where they could "talk a good game" but did not have the behavioral accompaniments. The length of time and seriousness which was given to this task by the youths, however, suggested they answered honestly and without attempts to present themselves in an unusually favorable or unfavorable light. Thus, the present results would seem to suggest these youths may have "pseudo-insight" and "logic-tight compartments," and they have not reconciled in their own minds these apparently contradictory insights. As a result, though they often have learned how to say the "right words" when asked, these words do not get translated into behaviors.

Teachers' Perceptions of CAP Students

Teacher perceptions are a key factor in determining how persistent school absenteeism is described and explained. Teachers play a major role in the management of school refusal and truancy. Successful outcome of this management depends heavily upon the attitudes and actions of these teachers which, in turn, are themselves determined by teacher perceptions towards school refusers or truants. Successful management is a two-way process, because the perception of the absentees (both of themselves and of their teachers) must also be taken into account.

To investigate this area, comparisons were undertaken between teacher perceptions of school refusers and truants, and the self-perceptions of these persistent absentees themselves. It was assumed that the closer these two perceptions related to one another, the more likely that the management of the problem would be effective and thus successful.

A statistically significant difference was found in 27 of the 76 possible comparisons of teacher and CAP student perceptions of the chronically absent students, themselves. The CAP students more often saw themselves possessing positive characteristics (such as charming, cooperative, generous, patient, and helpful) than did the teachers.

As identified by the teachers, behaviors/characteristics of adolescent school refusers and truants included:

anti-social	timid	not patient
anxious	shy	not understanding
depressive	not realistic	unforgiving
immature	not truthful	not sympathetic
not helpful	not well-behaved	not serious
not hard working	uncooperative	dependent

Positive characteristics/behaviors selected by the teachers were interesting in that with the exception of "friendly" and "kind," none of the other positive behaviors were selected (i.e., checked).

There was some evidence that teachers might be somewhat unsympathetic towards school refusers or truants. Eighty percent of the teachers identified "afraid" (a negative characteristic) as being indicative of CAP students; 33 "negative" characteristics were identified simply because the teachers could not identify them as positive characteristics of these students. For example, teachers could not describe a chronically absent student as warm, charming, or soft-hearted. Nonetheless,

the present study showed that teachers were more aware of the high self-consciousness and lack of stability in these non-attenders. Teachers saw these students as having low self-confidence, being unhappy, and not being proud of who they are.

Relationships with peers are important to adolescents, and here teachers tended to consider that school refusers or truants have poorer relationships. Although seen as friendly, CAP students were perceived as being disloyal, untrustworthy, unreliable, and inconsiderate. In interviews with the teachers, all but one of the teachers described chronically absent students as having few true friends in school and all of them mentioned that "in some strange way" the chronically absent students related better to the adults in the building than to their age peers.

In this study, a mismatch clearly existed between teacher perceptions and the self-ratings of school refusers and truants. It may well be teacher perceptions were correct, and those of non-attenders distorted, but unless the two perceptions could be brought closer together, management of the truancy issues would be difficult, and a successful outcome to the problem would be less likely.

CAs' Perceptions of CAP Students

CA perceptions of chronically absent youth are likewise important in determining the success of the Chronic Absenteeism Pilot. Successful outcomes depend heavily upon the attitudes and actions of the CAs assigned to the Pilot which, in turn, are themselves determined by the CAs' perceptions toward school refusers or truants. The success of this Pilot is a two-way process because the perceptions of the absentees (both of themselves and of their CAs) must also be taken into account.

To investigate this area, comparisons were made between CA perceptions of CAP students and the self-perceptions of the chronically absent students, themselves. It was assumed that the closer these two perceptions were to each other, the more likely the CAs' actions on behalf of the CAP students would be effective and thus successful.

A statistically significant difference was found in nearly one-third of the 76 possible comparisons of CA and CAP student perceptions of the chronically absent students, themselves. The CAP students saw themselves possessing more positive characteristics than did the CAs.

As identified by the CAs, behaviors/characteristics of CAP students included:

not patient	not afraid
not conceited	not cruel
not shy	not understanding
not sympathetic	not reliable

The CAs only identified two positive behaviors - cooperative and friendly - of CAP students.

The CAP CAs attempted to predict the CAP students' responses, but were not as uniform as the CAP students in statements endorsed by the students themselves. Interestingly, however, the CAs correctly predicted the students' responses in several instances. For example, CAs felt the students would respond negatively to "I do not like a lot of the things my friends say and do, but am afraid to tell them." and "My parents do not care what happens to me." The CAs described the CA-CAP student relationship in much the same manner the students described it. The CAs acknowledged the "dependent" relationship the students felt (e.g., "My CA helps me with problems with my teachers."), but did not think the students would endorse the dependency in the relationship as much as they did.

Comparison of CAP Students and Non-CAP Students

Truancy clearly identifies adolescents with significant problems in social functioning. However, adolescents in general are likely to have concerns about their social relationships with parents, teachers, and peers. Without a comparison group, it is difficult to judge the extent to which these problems are greater for truants.

A comparison group of school attenders was identified by New Futures staff as students acutely tuned to issues surrounding adolescents, especially adolescents from the city, and who would reflect many of the same demographic features of the CAP students. The gender and age distribution reflected those students identified in the CAP sample. The ethnic distribution for both sexes reflected that of the school population. As discussed below, factors connected with school (e.g., ability, achievement, attitudes and behaviors in school) and personality factors, more so than family factors, clearly differentiated the two samples.

In the interview data, more of the CAP males described themselves as hanging around with a large crowd or being part of a diffuse aggregate of friends. Asked what they did in their spare time, the CAP students and the Non-CAP students did not differ significantly in their reports. Favorite activities were spending time with friends, hanging out, watching TV, and engaging in sports.

Non-CAP students differed significantly from CAP students on over half (46 of the possible 76) of the comparisons of adjectives used to describe themselves. The attenders picked nearly all of the positive words on the list to describe themselves; the chronically absent students picked only four positive words: friendly, kind, trustful, and stable. Additionally, the Non-CAP students uniformly (over 80% agreement) indicated that many of the negative words simply did not apply to them. CAP students were far less consistent in their perceptions of themselves.

Analyses of the card-sort activity, likewise, suggested substantial differences between the Non-CAP and CAP students. Overall, the CAP students differed significantly on 48 of the 108 statements from their attending peers. Non-CAP students endorsed more positive statements about friends (e.g., "Most of my friends get good grades") and disagreed with more negative statements about schools (e.g., "School is not as important as people say it is"), about involvement with legal entities [e.g., "I am afraid of being busted (sic) by the cops"], and about dependent behaviors with CAs (e.g., "I need to talk with my CA when I have a problem"). Attenders uniformly disagreed with statements which showed human vulnerabilities as weaknesses [e.g., "People who show their feelings are weak." and "A person should take advantage of another person before they (sic) take advantage of you"]. Both groups of students strongly endorsed positive statements about their parents (e.g., "My parents want me to get an education").

More specifically, there seemed to be more items endorsed uniformly by the chronically absent kids related to luck or forces beyond their control (e.g., "Some people are successful because they are lucky") than was true for the Non-CAP students. Non-CAP students appreciated success was a matter of effort (e.g., "Becoming a success is a matter of hard work") and individuals had to assume responsibility for their own actions (e.g., they disagreed with the statement "If I get into trouble, it is because my friends got me into it"). Chronically absent students tended to describe aspects of school - teachers, other students, the school itself - with which they had difficulty rather than endorsing their own behaviors in the school. The CAP students, more often than attenders, described their teachers as too strict and as "messing with their business;" they saw the schools as places where student fights were common and where kids at their schools "have attitudes." The Non-CAP students, on the other hand, endorsed statements about themselves in the school setting. For example, 80 percent of the attenders said they joined activities and clubs at their schools, did not cause problems for their teachers, and had learned a lot from their schools.

By including a comparison group, another factor was accidently revealed. Non-CAP students were never asked to discuss the issue of truancy nor were they asked to comment on truant classmates; however, the researchers found a few "hidden truants" - males who admitted skipping

school, who had not been caught. Perhaps another factor which distinguishes identified non-attenders from attenders is the ability to maintain a "veil of innocence" which prevents teachers and administrators from suspecting truancy. These students described several situations where they "excused themselves from classes" or "did not attend a class" due to "involvement in other activities." For example, a particularly active student described using his extra-curricular activities as excuses for not attending particular classes regularly.

CA and Teacher Ratings of Engaging Behaviors

CAs and teachers were asked to complete a 36-item questionnaire on which they were asked to rate various "engaging behaviors" (e.g., "Avoid responding to a situation while angry or upset." and "Be cautious in substituting a label for a person.") as to their importance in engaging a client or student. Statistical analyses revealed no significant differences between teacher and CA ratings on each of the items. Nearly all teachers and CAs rated each of the items as "Very Important" or "Extremely Important." It may be that teachers and CAs feel that they must attempt to do all 36 engaging behaviors and/or that they have difficulty in prioritizing among these 36 behaviors.

Educational Importance of the Study

Few professionals doubt the importance of collaboration between social service agencies, including public schools, in meeting the needs of the youth in our country. This study investigated two years of collaboration among agencies around the issue of chronically absent youth. Data gathered from this study clearly illuminated issues inherent in interagency collaborations and provided insight into the appropriate climate necessary for effective collaboration. Additionally, this study advanced what is known about chronically absent youth and dispelled some of the "stereotypes" of chronic truants.

Data analyses revealed that despite elaborate interagency agreements, very little was known about potentially collaborative efforts on behalf of chronically absent youth in the city; what was known was seen as controversial and doomed to failure. This lack of mutuality surrounding chronically absent youth was rooted in basic ideological differences and agendas among the social service agencies involved, including the public schools. Substantial power differentials existed among the agencies. A legitimate convener (i.e., conduit) for CAP collaborative efforts could not be found; a few of the relevant stakeholders in CAP could not establish representation.

The results of the present study further suggest that the problem of chronic absenteeism is greater than previously reported. Substantial variability existed among schools in the manner of counting and reporting absent students. Statistical analyses revealed consistent differences in perceptions between CAP students and school attendees. The differences were found in school factors more often than in family issues. Personality characteristics also separated the groups of students. Gender differences among CAP students on the variables studied were more evident than racial differences.

The problem of chronically absent youth is a major one. To date, efforts in the urban area studied have been largely ineffective due to the problems noted previously. However, the difficulties inherent in working with such a population are equally great. It is hoped continuing efforts to overcome chronic school absenteeism will endure, and the present study will assist in that regard.

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